

THE EVOLUTION OF THE IDENTITY OF ISLAMIC ARCHITECTURE AFTER PROPHET MUHAMMAD (PBUH): SOME OBSERVATIONS

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Introduction

In this paper, I shall deal with some of the themes relating to the gradual evolution of the conspicuous identity of Islamic architecture from the time of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) till approximately the end of the first period of the Abbasid state (861 AC/247 H). It was during this period that Islamic architecture really matured. It reached its pinnacle in both technical and conceptual terms. It finally attained such qualities as artistic comprehensive excellence, universality, internationalism and profundity of styles and meanings that reflected unparalleled genius, innovation and creativity. The end of the first period of the Abbasid state has been pinpointed as the final phase in the evolution of the total identity of Islamic architecture as we know it today for several reasons. The following two reasons perhaps are most significant.

Firstly, the leadership of the development of the Islamic state and Islamic civilization while swinging towards the Abbasids and Iraq and Iran appeared to have completed a full natural cycle, having hitherto been under the custody firstly of the rightly-guided caliphs (*al-Khulafa' al-Rashidun*) principally in Madinah and then under the custody of the Umayyads in Syria. It was not by chance that the cycle occurred right in the lands which were destined to serve as the nucleus of Islam from its inception and during nearly each subsequent Islamic generation and period with all major parties, political and religious, playing their roles and making contributions. By and large, the end of the first period of the Abbasid state is also considered the end of the most prosperous period of the long Abbasid rule, as well as the end of one of the most glorious eras of Islam's cosmopolitan civilization. It stands to reason that the development of Islamic architecture towards the end of the same period was at its zenith

together with the rest of its cultural and civilizational constituents.

The second reason why the end of the first period of the Abbasid state is regarded as the final phase in the evolution of the total identity of Islamic architecture is that by the end of that particular period all the major ethnic groups: the Arabs, the Romans, the Persians and, to a lesser extent, the Turks, were actively exerting their influences over the expansion of Islamic civilization leaving their respective marks on the latter's extensive makeup. That means that the rich talent and prolonged cultural and civilizational exposures of these groups—and in fact many others but whose roles and contributions were not as significant at that point of time—were readily and happily employed to carry the culture and civilization of Islam to some new and hitherto unknown heights. Once the members of these groups and communities entered the fold of Islam, it was no longer a case of foreigners contributing to an alien religion and its alien culture or people who came from distant lands. Rather, it was the case of new Muslim members joining the ranks of the fast growing Islamic fraternity in the lands newly liberated by Islam with which they all closely and proudly associated themselves. The whole thing, furthermore, was a case of Islamic universal association and Islamic comprehensive worldview fully at work.

The evolution and growth of Islamic architecture was not an exception to this rule. Islamic architecture was immensely enriched and spurred by the presence and contributions of new geographic, cultural and socio-economic factors, making it a genuinely universal, eclectic and authoritative phenomenon that mirrored the universality and authority of the Islamic message that inspired it. Islam as a universal religion saw nothing wrong in enriching and multiplying the legitimate means for fulfilling its divine mission. The existing resources of the communities which were newly exposed to Islam were seen as a source of such novel and legitimate means. Naturally, the more the members of those new communities embraced Islam, the faster and wider the adoption and application of such means became.

The following issues are discussed in this paper: 1) What is Islamic architecture?; 2) The early Arabs and the enterprise of building; 3) The Muslims and the enterprise of building after Prophet

Muhammad (pbuh); 4) The Umayyads and the evolution of the identity of Islamic architecture; 5) The first Abbasid period and the evolution of the identity of Islamic architecture; and 6) Conclusion: Inventing in civilization *vis-à-vis* following in religion.

What is Islamic architecture?

Islamic architecture—in a few words—is an architecture whose functions and, to a lesser extent, form, are inspired primarily by Islam. Islamic architecture is a framework for the implementation of Islam. It facilitates, fosters and stimulates Muslim *‘ibadah* (worship) activities, which, in turn, account for every moment of their earthly lives. Islamic architecture only can come into existence under the aegis of Islamic perceptions of God, man, nature, life, death and the Hereafter. Thus, Islamic architecture encompasses the facilities and physical locus of the actualization of the Islamic message. Practically, Islamic architecture represents the religion of Islam that has been translated into reality at the hands of Muslims. It also represents the identity of Islamic culture and civilization.

Ibn Abdun, an Andalusian judge from the 12th century, is reported to have said—as quoted by Stefano Bianca: “As far as architecture is concerned, it is the haven where man’s spirit, soul and body find refuge and shelter.”¹ In other words, architecture is a container of people’s lives.

Also, Ibn Qutayba, a Muslim scholar of the 9th century, compared the house—as quoted by Afif Bahnassi—to a shirt, saying that just as the shirt should fit its owner, the house too should suit its dwellers.² That is to say, the aesthetic and utilitarian ends of the house must correspond to the needs and capabilities of its users. The two must perfectly suit each other.

Central to Islamic architecture is function with all of its

¹ Stefano Bianca, *Urban Form in the Arab World*, (London; New York: Thames and Hudson, 2000), p. 22.

² Afif Bahnassi, *The Islamic Architecture and its Specificities in Teaching Curricula*, <http://www.isesco.org.ma/pub/Eng/Islarch/P2.htm>

dimensions: corporeal, cerebral and spiritual. The form divorced from function is inconsequential. This, however, by no means implies that the form plays no role in Islamic architecture. It does play a prominent role, but its relevance is a supportive one supplementing and enhancing function. The form is important, but in terms of value and substance it always comes second to function and its wide scope. There must be the closest relationship between the ideals that underpin the form of buildings and the ideals that underpin their function, with which the users of buildings must be at ease. A rift or conflict between the two is bound to lead to a conflict of some far-reaching psychological proportion for the buildings users. This way, the role of form becomes equivalent to the role of function.

Islamic architecture promotes unity in diversity, that is, the unity of message and purpose, and the diversity of styles, methods and solutions. Certainly, this renders Islamic architecture as relevant and dynamic, consistent and adaptable. It is such a fascinating subject to study, for doing so is not about sheer art and architecture. It is more than that: it is about beholding the Islamic ideology and creed at work. It is about witnessing the microcosm of Islamic society, civilization and culture. Islamic architecture is about Islam taking up a manifest form.

The identity and vocabulary of Islamic architecture evolved as a means for the fulfilment of the concerns of Muslim societies. Islamic architecture was never an end in itself. It was the container of Islamic culture and civilization reflecting the cultural identity and level of Muslim creative and aesthetic consciousness. Hence, at the core of a genuine Islamic architecture must always rest the notion of sustainability and sustainable development.

Architecture, in general, should always be in service to people. It is never to be the other way round, this is to say that architecture should not evolve into a hobby or an adventure in the process imposing itself on society while forsaking or taking lightly people's identities, cultures or the demands of their daily struggles. Architecture, first and foremost, should remain associated with functionality. It should not deviate from its authentic character and stray into the world of excessive invention and abstraction.

Alfred Frazer, as reported by M. A. J. Beg, said about the

fundamental nature of Islamic architecture: "The architecture of Islam is the expression of a religion and its view of the world rather than that of a particular people or political or economic system."³

In the same vein, Titus Burckhardt also wrote that it is not surprising, nor strange, that the most outward manifestation of Islam as a religion and civilization reflects in its own fashion what is most inward in it.⁴ The same author further remarked: "If one were to reply to the question 'what is Islam?' by simply pointing to one of the masterpieces of Islamic art such as, for example, the Mosque of Cordova, or that of Ibn Tulun in Cairo, or one of the madrasahs in Samarqand....that reply, summary as it is, would be nonetheless valid, for the art of Islam expresses what its name indicates, and it does so without ambiguity."⁵

The early Arabs and the enterprise of building

It is a well established fact that at first the Arabs were neither interested in nor capable of erecting sophisticated buildings. That is fairly understandable if we take into account the climate, environment and geography of Arabia, as well as the lifestyle of the Arabs. K.A.C. Creswell wrote: "Arabia, at the rise of Islam, does not appear to have possessed anything worthy of the name of architecture. Only a small proportion of the population was settled, and these lived in dwellings which were scarcely more than hovels. Those who lived in mud brick houses were called *ahl al-madar*, and the Bedouin, from their tents of camel's-hair cloth, *ahl al-wabar*."⁶

This architectural inaptitude of the Arabs was exposed about five years before the start of Prophet Muhammad's mission in Makkah where the Ka'bah, the holiest and safest place on earth,

³ *Fine Arts in Islamic Civilization*, edited by M.A.J. Beg, (Kuala Lumpur: The University of Malaya Press, 1981), p. 16 (Introduction).

⁴ Titus Burckhardt, *Art of Islam*, (London: World of Islam Festival Publishing Company Ltd., 1976), p. 1.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁶ K.A.C. Creswell, *A Short Account of Early Muslim Architecture*, (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1989), p. 3.

stood. The Ka'bah had to be rebuilt due to damage caused to it firstly by a fire and then by torrential rains that soon followed. The best of the three major components needed for the successful execution of any architectural enterprise: expertise, technology and building materials, the people of Makkah lacked. Thus, lest the Ka'bah should be structurally very simple and made of some ephemeral materials like it was many times before, the people of Makkah had to look for other alternatives. The quandary was settled when "they came to know that a Roman ship was wrecked at al-Shua'iba, Makkah al-Mukarramah's port. Al-Waleed Ibn al-Mugheera accompanied by some Quraishites went to the port and purchased the wood of the ship. They made a contract with a carpenter named Baqum who happened to be one of the passengers of the ship, to rebuild the Holy Ka'bah with them in the Shami style."⁷

According to another version, when the job of rebuilding the Ka'bah started and the wood from the wrecked ship had been procured, "the Quraysh divided among themselves the various responsibilities connected with its reconstruction. They hired a Roman builder to build it and an Egyptian carpenter to help him with the woodwork."⁸

However, according to K.A.C. Creswell⁹, the man named Baqum referred to in the above quotation—who was one of the passengers on the wrecked ship and whom the Quraysh had hired—was both the Roman builder and Egyptian carpenter. The man was an Abyssinian and the building style that he employed was Abyssinian too. This is so because the remarkable style of building used in the reconstruction of the Ka'bah, with alternate courses of stone and wood, could only evolve in a country where wood was plentiful, and it is precisely in Abyssinia in a number of churches that many examples of this extraordinary technique are to be found. Whereas in Arabia timber was scarce, and there were no other examples where the same technique had been employed. The technique was

⁷ *The Construction of the Holy Ka'bah by Quraish*, <http://www.kabahinfo.net/eng-php/construction-holy-kabah-quraish.php>

⁸ *Short History of the Ka'bah*, <http://www.antomlife.com/English/hajj/2002/01/stories/article2.shtml>

⁹ K.A.C. Creswell, *A Short Account of Early Muslim Architecture*, p. 4.

somewhat alien to Arabia and the Arabs.

In spite of the Arabs' sincere efforts that extended beyond the Arabian context, however, the project of rebuilding the Ka'bah on the foundation where it stood when Prophet Ibrahim first built it could still not be duly completed. "The Quraysh found their funds exhausted. So they reduced the size (of the Ka'bah) on one side—as it is today; thus a part of the original foundation was left out, and that is the portion known as '*Hijr Isma'il*' (the Enclosure of Isma'il)."¹⁰ This clearly explains the architectural limitations of the Arabs as a community and Arabia as a region.

In terms of profound architectural knowledge and building technology in particular, the same trend showed little improvement when Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and the first Muslims migrated to Madinah and embarked on the creation and development of the city of Madinah, firstly as an Islamic city-state and then as the capital city of the nascent but fast growing Islamic state, as we have seen in the third chapter.

Despite all this, however, the first Muslims had neither time nor interest to set out on mastering some more sophisticated styles of building. They were engrossed by two far more pertinent tasks: the task of spreading the message of Islam to newly liberated lands, and the task of cultivating the more urgent and desired aspects of civilization. Certainly, advancing the existing building styles was at the outset an important but not the most important undertaking of the Muslims. In addition, according to some principles relating to the growth of civilizations, it was natural for Islam, as is for any other religion or ideology, that a certain amount of time was required in order for the purest forms of its art and architecture to manifest themselves.¹¹ It follows due to this rule, that even if the Muslims from the very beginning had committed themselves to gaining mastery of sophisticated architectural styles and to evolving some of the purest forms of Islamic architecture, the same would have been

¹⁰ *Short History of the Ka'bah*, <http://www.antomlife.com/English/hajj/2002/01/stories/article2.shtml>

¹¹ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), p. 14.

considerably delayed.

When we say that the earliest examples of Islamic architecture were extremely simple and that the early Muslim mentality was not much inclined towards cultivating some refined building styles, this does not mean that the first Muslims adhered to certain religious norms and that those who came after them plainly violated them by erecting some sophisticated and stylish buildings. The nurturing of an exclusive identity of Islamic architecture was evolving proportionately to the development and expansion of Islamic culture and civilization. Since it would not have been on even terms with the growth and competency of other civilizational constituents generated by the community, nurturing an exclusive identity of Islamic architecture was not at all feasible during the early days of Islam. As such, seldom did the first generation of Muslims give serious thought to it. They aptly looked at it as both a superfluous thing and a possible hindrance to the current mission that was engrossing the whole community. Later, however, things changed and the matter asserted its utility as well as pertinence to the life of Muslims, and it was not long before it evolved to one of the most discernible features of Islamic civilization securing the endorsement of both the religious and intellectual leaderships in the process.

Erecting monumental buildings during the early stages of Islam's existence was not at all a priority. This, coupled with both the Arabs' relative incompetence and indifference to doing so, **should** by no means be viewed as an impediment or stain on the history of early Islamic civilization. Rather, such was a very natural thing. The whole issue ought to be observed against the backdrop of the total message of Islam, as well as against the backdrop of the socio-political and economic laws that govern the birth and evolution of human civilization in general, as well as those laws that governed the birth and evolution of Islamic civilization inspired by Allah's last revelation to mankind through the seal of prophets, Muhammad (pbuh), in particular.

The Muslims and the enterprise of building after Prophet Muhammad (pbuh)

In the wake of the departure of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), things in the state did not dramatically change. The same people with the same mentality and vision remained in charge of charting the course of community affairs. The old pervasive attitude towards the enterprise of building remained intact and seemed unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. However, the swift and awe-inspiring advances against the Persians and Byzantines not only brought the Muslim conquerors face to face with some highly evolved cultures and civilizations, but also landed enormous fortunes in their coffers. Nevertheless, on account of booty being lawful property, no one could proscribe the latest developments, especially the accumulated riches. Blame is only attached to waste, betrayal of trust and lack of planning. Since the expenditure of the Muslims of that time followed a plan and served truth and its ways, amassing property in fact helped them along on the path of truth and served the purpose of attaining the other world.¹²

The sensational change in the economic situation of the Muslims, coupled with substantial changes in the social structure of the ever-expanding state, meant that the desert attitude of the Arabs and their low standard of living was slowly but steadily approaching its end. Due to the very nature of the sudden developments and the nature of their causes, the situation appeared unlikely to revert to its one-time course. If anything, it seemed set to keep improving further.

As an illustration for this novel Islamic phenomenon let's remark that as early as during the time of the third rightly-guided Caliph, 'Uthman b. Affan, many people embarked on building houses in different parts of the vast state with hitherto unthinkable design and size. Those who spurned to follow suit had their old houses repaired and notably improved. For example, a prominent

¹² Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, Translated from Arabic by Franz Rosenthal, (Princeton: Princeton University Press: 1967), see the chapter: "The Transformation of the Caliphate into Royal Authority", pp. 160-166.

companion of the Prophet (pbuh), al-Zubayr, built himself a dwelling each in Basra, Egypt and Kufah. Another companion, Talhah, built a house in Kufah and had his old residence in Madinah bettered using plaster, bricks and teakwood. Yet another of the Prophet's eminent companion, Sa'd b. Abi Waqqas, erected himself a house in one of the suburbs of Madinah making it high and spacious and putting balustrades on top of it.¹³ Several chronicles allege –although with apparent exaggeration– that even Caliph Uthman's house in Madinah was no exception. It was seven stories high and constructed of stone with metal doors.¹⁴ New building patterns were furthermore associated with the people enjoying good attire, good food and good entertainment within the confines of Islam.

It ought to be stated that all these remarkable events and developments have clearly been prophesied in both the Holy Qur'an and the Prophet's sunnah in different contexts, degrees and tones. Such, however, came about not as a symbol of misfortune or a waning of faith, but as a sign that God's promise to His true servants who were to inevitably inherit the land, had begun to materialize. Apart from viewing the Muslims' inheritance of lands, their emergence as the world's leading power, and the creation of a robust global civilization as the instrument of a divine plan, the same is to be viewed also as a natural and estimated consequence of embracing Islam as the comprehensive lifestyle intended not only for a group of people, historical moment or geographical region, but for the whole of mankind—transcending confines of the time-space continuum. Indeed, whosoever was able to come to terms with the actual nature of Prophet Muhammad's mission could somewhat easily foresee its wondrous achievements and triumphs. Many people thus knew, anticipated and worked for the global victory of Islam. When it came, the victory was ideological, philosophical, spiritual, cultural and civilizational, and many did not hesitate to enjoy it to the fullest as a sign of appreciation and gratitude.

¹³ Al-Mas'udi, *Muruj al-Dhahab*, (Beirut: Dar al-Ma'rifah, 1983), vol. 2, p. 241.

¹⁴ Nezar Al-Sayyad, *Cities and Caliphs*, (London: Greenwood Press, 1991), p. 70.

Allah says in the Qur'an about this:

Allah has promised, to those among you who believe and work righteous deeds, that He will, of a surety, grant them in the land, inheritance (of power), as He granted it to those before them; that He will establish in authority their religion—the one which He has chosen for them; and that He will change (their state), after the fear in which they (lived), to one of security and peace: 'They will worship Me (alone) and not associate aught with Me. 'If any do reject Faith after this, they are rebellious and wicked. (Al-Nur, 55)

Allah was well pleased with the believers when they swore allegiance to you beneath the tree, and He knew what was in their hearts, and He sent down peace of reassurance on them and rewarded them with a near victory; and much booty that they will capture. Allah is ever Mighty, Wise. (Al-Fath, 18, 19)

And who is more unjust than he who forges a lie against Allah and he is invited to Islam, and Allah does not guide the unjust people. They desire to put out the light of Allah with their mouths but Allah will perfect His light, though the unbelievers may be averse. He it is Who sent His Messenger with the guidance and the true religion, that He may make it overcome the religions, all of them, though the polytheists may be averse. (Al-Saff, 7-9)

The Prophet (pbuh) was unequivocal on the impending triumphs of Islam and Muslims. For example, a Companion of the Prophet (pbuh) 'Adi bin Hatim narrated: "While I was in the city of the Prophet, a man came and complained to him (the Prophet) of destitution and poverty. Then another man came and complained of robbery (by highwaymen). The Prophet said, "Adi! Have you been to Al-Hira?" I said, "I haven't been to it, but I was informed about it."

He said, "If you should live for a long time, you will certainly see that a lady in a Howdah traveling from Al-Hira will (safely reach Mecca and) perform the *Tawaf* of the Ka'ba, fearing none but Allah." I said to myself, "What will happen to the robbers of the tribe of Tai who have spread evil throughout the country?" The Prophet further said, "If you should live long, the treasures of Khosrau will be opened (and taken as spoils)." I asked, "You mean Khosrau, son of Hurmuz, (the king of Persia)?" He said, "Khosrau, son of Hurmuz; and if you should live long, you will see that one will carry a handful of gold or silver and go out looking for a person to accept it from him, but will find none to accept it from him. And any of you, when meeting Allah, will meet Him without needing an interpreter between him and Allah to interpret for him, and Allah will say to him, 'Didn't I send a messenger to teach you?' He will say, 'Yes.' Allah will say, 'Didn't I give you wealth and do you favors?' He will say, 'Yes.' Then he will look to his right and see nothing but Hell, and look to his left and see nothing but Hell." 'Adi further said: "I heard the Prophet saying, 'Save yourself from the (Hell) Fire even with half a date (to be given in charity) and if you do not find a half date, then with a good pleasant word.'" 'Adi added: "(later on) I saw a lady in a Howdah traveling from Al-Hira till she performed the *Tawaf* of the Ka'ba, fearing none but Allah. And I was one of those who opened (conquered) the treasures of Khosrau, son of Hurmuz. If you should live long, you will see what the Prophet Abu-l-Qasim had said: 'A person will come out with a handful of gold or silver and go out looking for a person to accept it from him, but will find none to accept it from him (due to the abundance of wealth).'"¹⁵

The Prophet (pbuh) also said: "You will attack Arabia and Allah will enable you to conquer it, then you would attack Persia and He would make you to conquer it. Then you would attack Rome and Allah will enable you to conquer it..."¹⁶

A Companion Khabbab bin Al-Arat narrated: "We complained to the Prophet (of the persecution inflicted on us by the infidels) while he was sitting in the shade of the Ka'ba, leaning over his Burd

¹⁵ Al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Vol. 4, Book 56, Hadith No. 793.

¹⁶ Muslim, *Sahih Muslim*, Book 41, Hadith No. 6930.

(i.e. covering sheet). We said to him, "Would you seek help for us? Would you pray to Allah for us?" He said, "Among the nations before you a (believing) man would be put in a ditch that was dug for him, and a saw would be put over his head and he would be cut into two pieces; yet that (torture) would not make him give up his religion. His body would be combed with iron combs that would remove his flesh from the bones and nerves, yet that would not make him abandon his religion. By Allah, this religion (i.e. Islam) will prevail till a traveler from San'a' (in Yemen) to Hadrarmaut will fear none but Allah, or a wolf as regards his sheep, but you (people) are hasty."¹⁷

A Companion Abu Zuhair narrated: "I heard the Prophet saying, "Yemen will be conquered and some people will migrate (from Madinah) and will urge their families, and those who will obey them to migrate (to Yemen) although Madinah will be better for them; if they but knew. Sham (Syria, Palestine, Lebanon and Jordan) will also be conquered and some people will migrate (from Madinah) and will urge their families and those who will obey them, to migrate (to Sham) although Madinah will be better for them; if they but knew. 'Iraq will be conquered and some people will migrate (from Madinah) and will urge their families and those who will obey them to migrate (to 'Iraq) although Madinah will be better for them; if they but knew."¹⁸

No one doubted that these new developments heralded the imminent advent of disparate crafts, skills, trades and professions, some of which were related directly or indirectly to the phenomenon of erecting buildings. Because they are something additional to just making a living, the number and quality of such crafts, talents and professions always depend on the extent of the civilization in the cities, as well as on the sedentary culture and luxury people enjoy.¹⁹ The same formula governs approving, appreciating, performing and promoting the art of architecture too in that it also falls within the realm of crafts, talents and professions. This means that the relationship between civilization and the birth and germination of a

¹⁷ Al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Vol. 4, Book 56, Hadith No. 809.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, Vol. 3, Book 30, Hadith No. 99.

¹⁹ Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, p. 343.

complementary architecture is causal; the former always being the cause and the latter the effect. In other words, a sophisticated Islamic architecture that bore a totally new identity could originate—and it, in fact, did—only when Muslims attained a discernible civilizational strength and identity, for Islamic architecture via its status, function and form epitomized such strength and identity.

The civilizational strength and identity we are referring to here as causes of Islamic architecture imply, firstly, the Islamic quintessence that Muslims successfully integrated into all aspects of their life. Additionally, this implies those cultural and civilizational features that were instigated solely by the arrival and spread of the Islamic revealed message, as well as those cultural and civilizational aspects and features that were already advanced and extensively made use of by other nations and communities, but only *after* they had been duly adjusted and Islamized where adjustments and Islamization were necessary.

Certainly, it is because of this that Ibn Khaldun was of the view that architecture is both the foundation and expression of a civilization. The city phenomenon with all of its urban ingredients, including advanced infrastructure, is a natural consequence in the progression of civilization from desert life to sedentary culture. According to Ibn Khaldun, cities could not become possible until large and well-organized groups of humans start producing more than they consume. The same groups thus become compelled to seek ways to store the surplus, paving the way for the emergence of crafts, specializations and professions. Cities are a product of royal authority and dynasties; their existence is conditioned by the latter.²⁰ “The explanation for this is that building and planning are features of sedentary culture brought about by luxury and tranquility.”²¹ Such features can be generated only after an abandonment of bedouin life and the features that go with it, as part of the dynamic civilizational evolution. Hence, Ibn Khaldun infers, the existence of bedouins

²⁰ Hisham Ja'it, “*Nazrah Ibn Khaldun li al-Madinah wa Mushkilah al-Tamdin*”, in *Ibn Khaldun wa al-Fikr al-'Arabi al-Mu'asir*, n.ed. (Cairo: al-Dar al-220 Arabiyyah li al-Kitab, 1982), p. 490-499.

²¹ Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, vol. 2 p. 235, 296-301, 357.

is prior to, and the basis of, the existence of towns and cities. Urbanization, and, as such, refined civilization with refined built environment, is found to be the goal of the Bedouin.²²

The Umayyads and the evolution of the identity of Islamic architecture

It goes without saying that the development of a genuine identity of Islamic architecture made its greatest strides when the Umayyad and then Abbasid caliphates became most prosperous. The Umayyad caliph al-Walid b. Abd al-Malik can be taken as a case in point. He was the person who contributed arguably the biggest share towards the emergence of the total identity of Islamic architecture. So concerned for the building enterprise was the caliph al-Walid, that historians always remark that erecting fine buildings was a culture during his tenure as a caliph. As a result, the people would meet each other during that period and normally ask: "What and how much have you built?"²³ The caliph al-Walid built the Great Mosque in Damascus which was regarded as a wonder of the world. He also rebuilt and enlarged, among others, the al-Masjid al-Aqsa in Jerusalem, the Great Mosque in San'a, Yemen, the Prophet's Mosque in Madinah, and the Mosque of 'Amr b. al-'As in Cairo. It is said—for good or for bad—that Caliph al-Walid is the first in Islam who introduced mosque decoration on a large scale.²⁴

At the same time, however, it is said about the caliph al-Walid b. Abd al-Malik, that during his rule the Muslim state was affluent like never before, due to the enormous wealth amassed from new conquests. Al-Ya'qubi, for instance, comments that so enormous were the spoils obtained by the Muslim army in newly opened places in Iraq, Iran, Transoxania and India, that their like has never

²² *Ibid.*, vol. 2 p. 235, 296-301.

²³ Ibn Kathir, *al-Bidayah wa al-Nihayah*, (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-221 Ilmiyyah, 1985), vol. 9 p. 172.

²⁴ Ibn Hajar Al-221 Asqalani, *Fath al-Bari bi Sharh Sahih al-Bukhari*, (Cairo: Maktabah al-Kulliyyah al-Azhariyyah, 1978), vol. 3, p. 108.

been heard of before.²⁵ Sometimes he simply writes that the riches were massive.²⁶ The whole state was generally peaceful, thriving and expanding. Under these conditions, the largest part of the populace throughout the vast Muslim lands acquired some wealth in one form or another.

Hence, one of the reasons why the caliph al-Walid embarked on erecting a number of mosques of magnificent proportions—most of which occupied a special place in the Muslim tradition and, as such, in every Muslim's heart and mind—was his earnest wish that places of worship be properly looked after and, just like any other element of the dynamic Muslim society, be enabled to mirror God's abundant boon and blessing bestowed on the Islamic Community. The caliph feared that leaving mosques non-reflective of the Almighty's bounty and gifts to Muslims may lead to disrespecting them by those who possessed weak faith from current and subsequent generations.

Not only did al-Walid construct mosques but he was also very much concerned about maximizing their function as community development centers. Surely, that was a segment of his numerous urbanization and social welfare programs meant to improve the urban conditions of the state. Al-Walid thus wished to provide the people, in particular the urban unemployed, with work opportunities²⁷ and new avenues to social, economic, spiritual and intellectual growth from which everyone could benefit. If possible, everyone within his/her capacity was to be turned into a community asset. Only those who were really unable to stand on their own feet were munificently looked after by the government. Thus, al-Walid made grants to the lepers, and stopped them from begging. To every cripple, he gave a servant, and to every blind man, one to lead him.²⁸ Orphans were duly looked after and tutors were assigned for the purpose of their

²⁵ Al-Ya'qubi, *Tarikh al-Ya'qubi*, (Beirut: Dar Beirut, 1980), vol. 2, p. 287.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, vol. 2 p. 288.

²⁷ M.A. Shaban, *Islamic History a New Interpretation*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), p. 118.

²⁸ Muhammad b. 'Ali Ibn Tabataba, *Al-Fakhri*, translated by C.E.J. Whitting, (London: Darf Publishers Limited, 1990), p. 123. Ibn Jarir al-Tabari, *The History*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), vol. 23 p. 219.

education.²⁹ Whenever coming to the two holy cities, Makkah and Madinah, al-Walid used to generously distribute many foreign slaves, vessels of gold and silver, and other wealth.³¹ M. A. Shaban observed that "the regime (headed by al-Walid) was prodigally generous in grants of lands and money to the ruling house, Arab leaders, poets, and even to its ancestral enemy, the family of the Prophet".³²

Al-Walid's sincerity and determination in making the people live as assets—no matter how (in) significant—to the community, is clearly demonstrated by the following two incidents recorded by al-Tabari and others. A man from the Banu Makhzum came to al-Walid asking him for help in respect of a debt of his. Al-Walid appeared set to help the man but with a condition, so he asked: "Have you recited the Qur'an?" The man replied in the negative. Al-Walid then knocked off the man's turban with a rod he had in his hand and struck him several times with it, saying to a man in attendance: "Keep this fellow with you, and do not let him part from you until he has recited the Qur'an."³³

Also, another man is reported to have come to the caliph al-Walid seeking that his debt be paid up. Al-Walid asked: "Have you recited the Qur'an?" When the man answered in the affirmative, al-Walid then asked him to recite ten verses from two different chapters in the Qur'an. The man did so following which al-Walid said: "Yes, we'll pay up for you..."³⁴ Al-Walid himself, despite all his engagements and functions, used to finish reciting the entire Qur'an every three days; in the month of Ramadan, he would do it seventeen times.³⁵

Furthermore, in order to optimize the function of mosques

²⁹ Shamsuddin al-Dhahabi, *Tarikh al-Islam*, (Beirut: Dar al-Kitab al-'Arabi, 1993), vol. 8 p. 500.

³⁰ Al-Ya'qubi, *Tarikh al-Ya'qubi*, vol. 2, p. 285.

³¹ Ibn Jarir al-Tabari, *The History*, vol. 23 p. 180.

³² M.A. Shaban, *Islamic History a New Interpretation*, p. 118.

³³ Ibn Jarir al-Tabari, *The History*, vol. 23 p. 219. Al-Baladhuri, *Ansab al-Ashraf*, (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1996), vol. 8 p. 80.

³⁴ Ibn Jarir al-Tabari, *The History*, vol. 23 p. 220. Al-Baladhuri, *Ansab al-Ashraf*, vol. 8 p. 80.

³⁵ Shamsuddin al-Dhahabi, *Tarikh al-Islam*, vol. 8 p. 498.

as community development centers all over the vast Muslim state, al-Walid is reported to have made grants to the scholars or jurists (*fuqaha'*) so that they could freely concentrate on performing what is expected from them, that is, to be exemplary teachers, role models, guides and supervisors of the community's general development.³⁶ In the same vein, a man called Ibrahim b. Abi 'Iblah reported that al-Walid used to hand him bowls filled with silver, commissioning him to distribute the same to the students of the Qur'an (*qurra'*) in Jerusalem, as recorded in al-Dhahabi's "*Tarikh al-Islam*"³⁷, or to the students of the Qur'an (*qurra'*) in the *al-Masjid al-Aqsa* in Jerusalem, as recorded in Ibn 'Asakir's "*Tarikh Madinah Dimashq*".³⁸ Indeed, driven by the same motive, al-Walid instituted the tradition of sponsoring public meals in mosques during the month of Ramadan known as the month of worship (*'ibadah*), and during which the mosques bustled with life and activities. No ruler in the history of Islamic civilization before al-Walid had done the like on as large a scale.³⁹

Undoubtedly, the character of the caliph al-Walid epitomized the character of a majority of the Umayyad rulers and their culture of building. But the extravagant building activities of many of eventually overtaxed state finances. This prompted one of the last Umayyad caliphs, Yazid III, to declare upon his enthronement that he will "lay neither stone on stone nor brick on brick".⁴⁰ By then, however, the Umayyad caliphate was on the verge of collapse and another Muslim dynasty, that of the Abbasids—set to rule the Muslim community much longer than the Umayyads—was in its ascendancy. Six years after Yazid III, the Umayyad caliphate came to an end. The introduction of a new culture relating to the field of building by the caliph Yazid III, though symbolically, heralded the imminent end of an era and the beginning of a new one, not only in architecture but also in all other fields of Islamic culture and civilization.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, vol. 8 p. 500.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, vol. 8 p. 498.

³⁸ Ibn 224 Asakir, *Tarikh Madinah Dimashq*, (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1995), vol. 63 p. 176.

³⁹ Al-Ya'qubi, *Tarikh al-Ya'qubi*, vol. 2, p. 291.

⁴⁰ K.A.C. Creswell, *A Short Account of Early Muslim Architecture*, p. 114.

However, the two Umayyad caliphs whose building ambitions were closest to al-Walid's lived before al-Walid and not after him. They were Mu'awiyah, the first Umayyad caliph, and al-Walid's predecessor and father, Abd al-Malik b. Marwan. But due to the nature of and circumstances in which the identity of Islamic architecture was emerging and maturing, their roles and contributions are not as immense and palpable, and thus not as well known and celebrated as those of al-Walid. About Mu'awiyah, for example, it is said that he was the first one in Islam to start erecting massive and solid buildings (*tashyid*). The commencement of more than a few important traditions relating to the evolution of the comprehensive language of Islamic architecture has been directly associated with him.⁴¹

Regarding the caliph Abd al-Malik b. Marwan, al-Walid's father, he was the one who built one of the greatest masterpieces in early Islamic architecture: the Dome of the Rock. The job was completed most probably in 692 AC/ 73 H. The Dome of the Rock is located on an artificial platform approximately in the center of the al-Masjid al-Aqsa (*al-Haram al-Sharif* or Noble Sanctuary) in Jerusalem.⁴² According to K.A.C. Creswell, it is "an annular building and consists in its ultimate analysis of a wooden dome 20.44 m. in diameter, set on a high drum, pierced with sixteen windows and resting on four piers and twelve columns, placed in a circle just large enough to surround the Rock, and so arranged that three columns alternate with each pier. A central cylinder is thus formed with height about equal to its diameter. This circle of supports is placed in the centre of a large octagon averaging about 20.59 m. per side, formed by eight walls of 9.50 m. in height (excluding the parapet, which measures 2.60 m.). Externally there are seven bays on each side, but those next to the corners—that is to say the bay at each end of each side, or sixteen in all—are treated as blind panels. Each remaining

⁴¹ Al-Ya qubi, *Tarikh al-Ya 'qubi*, vol. 2, p. 232.

⁴² By the al-Masjid al-Aqsa we mean the whole area of the Noble Sanctuary, i.e., *al-Haram al-Sharif*, in Jerusalem which was the second mosque on earth built 40 years after the Ka'bah. The present-day al-Masjid al-Aqsa covers only a section of the Sanctuary.

bay is pierced in the upper part by a window.”⁴³

The Rock (*sakhrāh*) which the domed edifice shelters, is the highest point in the *al-Haram al-Sharif* or Noble Sanctuary. Much extraordinary reverence is attached to the Rock, which, nevertheless, is rooted in little truth. The Rock is significant inasmuch as it constitutes a part of the al-Masjid al-Aqsa (Noble Sanctuary). It cannot be held more important and, as such, more revered than any other section of the Mosque. One of the major reasons for building the Dome of the Rock was a religious one, which suited the nature of the caliph Abd al-Malik b. Marwan. The caliph felt that it was his pressing duty to manage and maintain the al-Masjid al-Aqsa, the third holiest mosque in Islam. In fact, not only on the al-Masjid al-Aqsa did the caliph Abd al-Malik focus his efforts but also on the whole area of Jerusalem.⁴⁴ The chief aim of the caliph thus was to promote, encourage and facilitate pilgrimage to the revered site, which is in accordance with the Prophet's traditions as well as the practices of some of the Prophet's earliest companions who occasionally took the trouble to journey to Jerusalem, and in some instances, **even settle and die there.**⁴⁵

The caliph Abd al-Malik was very much aware that ever since the second caliph Umar b. al-Khattab had built a simple mosque on one side of the *al-Haram al-Sharif*, using the most ephemeral building materials, no other building activity had ever been undertaken in the area. Moreover, the same area was surrounded by several churches some of which were so enchantingly fair and renowned for their splendor that they dazzled the minds of the Muslims. Thus, Abd al-Malik may have decided to build a large and elevated Dome somewhere in the centre of the *al-Haram al-Sharif*. The Dome was intended to serve, firstly as a dome (symbol) of the existing caliph Umar's Mosque—albeit somewhat at a distant location; secondly, as a dome (symbol) of the entire al-Masjid al-Aqsa in a wider sense of the word;⁴⁶ and finally, as a symbol of the victory and permanent

⁴³ K.A.C. Creswell, *A Short Account of Early Muslim Architecture*, p. 20.

⁴⁴ Ibn Kathir, *Al-Bidayah wa al-Nihayah*, vol. 8 p. 283.

⁴⁵ Shurrah Muhammad, *Bayt al-Maqdis wa al-Masjid al-Aqsa*, (Damascus: Dar al-Qalam, 1994), p. 355.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 372.

supremacy of Islam and Muslims in the multi-religious region of Jerusalem and Palestine in general.⁴⁷

Islamic architecture during the Umayyad period clearly displayed the dominant influence of the Christian architecture of Syria which, however, was not an exclusive one. Another influence is apparent even in some of the earliest monuments, like the Dome of the Rock, where the late Persian motifs appear in the mosaic decoration along with the well-known Byzantine forms. Moreover, Coptic evidence also became demonstrable at the end of the Umayyad period.⁴⁸ All these influences, however, before being integrated into the body of the Islamic architectural vocabulary, partially or fully, were duly adjusted and Islamized wherever and whenever such processes were necessary, so that the mentioned influences were in full conformity with Islamic beliefs and practices.

The following denotes some of the characteristics of Islamic architecture under the Umayyads and mainly relates to the outward appearance, as presented by K.A.C. Creswell:

Nearly all the surviving monuments of this period are in Syria, which is not surprising, for Syria was the seat of the dynasty. Most of them are really splendid structures of cut stone, some of ashlar in courses 80 to 90 cm. high, with arcades resting on marble columns. The mosques were nearly always covered with a gable roof of timber... The minarets were tall square towers...⁴⁹

Many Umayyad caliphs, for a variety of reasons, were involved in building a number of desert residences or royal palaces. These residences were generally about 70 m. square, or multiples of those dimensions. Their outer enclosures were strongly fortified. "The interiors

⁴⁷ Spahic Omer, *Issues in the History and Character of the Islamic Built Environment*, (Kuala Lumpur: International Islamic University Malaysia, 2005), p. 206.

⁴⁸ K.A.C. Creswell, *A Short Account of Early Muslim Architecture*, p. 225.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 225.

were divided up differently into *bayts*. These *bayts*, each of which consisted of living-rooms and a court, were arranged round the interior of the enclosure so that a court was left over in the center.⁵⁰

It was during the later Umayyad period that brick walls and brick vaults, hitherto almost unknown in Syria, made their appearance, but it must be especially noted that the technique (joints thinner than the bricks) shows that this innovation did not come, as previously, from Byzantium, but from Iraq. Umayyad architecture employed the following constructive devices: the semicircular arch, the round horse-shoe arch, the pointed arch, flat arches or lintels with a semicircular relieving arch above, arches braced with tie-beams, joggled voussoirs, tunnel-vaults and cross-vaults in stone and brick, the latter constructed without centering, the system of roofing in which transverse arches support parallel tunnel-vaults, wooden domes, and also domes of stone and brick on true spherical-triangle pendentives or squinches. The intersection of tunnel-vaults was avoided. In fortification, half-round flanking towers were employed, likewise the machicolis, but the bent entrance does not appear to have been known.⁵¹

In planning, a geometrical network derived from earlier Syrian practice was employed for laying out the Dome of the Rock, and a curious system of successive, symmetrical subdivisions into three, not yet noted elsewhere, is found at Minya and Mshatta (desert palaces). The decoration was of the most splendid kind, marble was used for paneling, the slabs being cut in half and opened like a book, so that the wavy grain

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 226.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 226.

ran from opposite sides towards the joint. The upper part of the exterior and interior walls was sometimes decorated with glass mosaic (*fisaiḥḥisa*), vaster surfaces being covered than had ever been known before. The Umayyad mosques in Iraq were square in plan, had walls of brick, and its flat timber roof rested directly on the columns without the intermediary of arches. The columns were sometimes of stone, but frequently of wood.⁵²

The first Abbasid period and the evolution of the identity of Islamic architecture

The shift in the centre of gravity from Damascus—the centre of the Umayyad power—to Baghdad, the center of the Abbasid power (which was built by the second Abbasid caliph Abu Ja'far al-Mansur in 762 AC/145 H, twelve years after the Umayyads had been dethroned) signified the dawn of a new phase in the evolution of the identity of Islamic civilization; including art and architecture. Indeed, for such dramatic developments to take place, an equally dramatic set of causes leading to it need mentioning. Some of those causes were man-generated and some were the result of a natural course of events generated by the laws of the development of society, culture and history. Of those causes were new patrons and a new political will, a geographical shift from Sham (Syria, Palestine and Jordan) to Iraq and Iran, support for the new protagonists from different social, ethnic and religious backgrounds, such as the Persians and later the Turks, to express themselves artistically and culturally and contribute their novel ideas, and finally to manifest the paradigm change in the overall social, political and economic perspectives of the Abbasid rulers.

The process of change in architecture was best exemplified in

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 226. See also: Volkmar Enderlein, *Syria and Palestine: the Umayyad Caliphate*, in *Islam: Art and Architecture*, edited by Markus Hattstein & Peter Delius, (Cologne: Konemann, 2000), p. 60-86.

the Round City of Baghdad.⁵³ Towards the end of the first Abbasid period when the city of Samarra was built in 836 AC/222H by the caliph al-Mu'tasim as a new Abbasid capital, it was there "that Islamic art came of age, and from that centre it spread virtually throughout the entire Muslim world, also influencing local Jewish and Christian art."⁵⁴ The city of Samarra served as the Abbasid capital 56 years during which eight caliphs succeeded each other in the office. Although Samarra was built by the caliph al-Mu'tasim, it was his successors and sons, the caliphs al-Wathiq and al-Mutawakkil, who made the city famous and influential as read about today. Ibn Kathir went so far as to emphasize that the caliph al-Mu'tasim was not known to have had much fondness for building. His passion was warfare, and the massive investments were required for its sake.⁵⁵

It follows that the notable buildings of the new Abbasid period signified no longer signified *phases* in the evolution of the identity of Islamic architecture but were unsurpassable in their quality and represented the new established Islamic architectural identity that was increasingly asserting itself firmly on the world scene. Furthermore, it follows that the same buildings did not come into existence out of nothing. They were an extension and continuation of the works of Islamic art and architecture during the Umayyad period. They were built upon foundations laid by the latter and were tinted by the hues of a new era and the new cultural and civilizational advancements and its leading protagonists. The Umayyad and the first Abbasid periods represent somewhat different but mutually complementing eras during which the conspicuous identity of Islamic architecture evolved from its simplest nature and most rudimentary qualities to a fascinating and refined global phenomenon. Both the Umayyads and Abbasids contributed their respective shares to the same cause and objective. Islamic architecture was stimulated by, and it was only natural that it kept pace with, the rapid growth of Islamic universal civilization for which Islamic architecture served as a framework, a

⁵³ Robert Hillenbrand, *Islamic Art and Architecture*. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1999), p. 40.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

⁵⁵ Ibn Kathir, *al-Bidayah wa al-Nihayah*, vol. 10 p. 309.

container, or a mirror.

Titus Burckhardt, while dwelling on the theme of the evolution of the identity of Islamic art and architecture, also concurs that Islamic architecture by the middle of the second Hijrah century, i.e., when the city of Baghdad was built, found its own language. It really matured by the end of the first Abbasid period. Titus Burckhardt says:

The Dome of the Rock at Jerusalem, which was built between 688 and 692 A.D., about 60 years after the Prophet's death, and is the most ancient Muslim monument surviving in a state of complete preservation, still belongs to Byzantine art, at the same time as being a work of Muslim art in the choice of its constituent elements. The Great Mosque of Damascus, started in 706 and finished in 715 is, on the other hand, *a priori* a work of Islamic art, at least in its major forms if not in its details. After this date, and more precisely towards the middle of the eighth century A.D., the new art was to expand very rapidly and on a broad front; the great works which then emerge out of the darkness of time, such as the Great Mosque of Cordova, founded in 785, and that of Ibn Tulun in Cairo, finished in 879, no longer represent phases in a still tentative evolution but are, in their quality as art, unsurpassable masterpieces. This means that Islamic art had, by the middle of the second century of the Hijrah, found its own language.⁵⁶

Around the same time, the Muslims were increasingly borrowing less from the host countries in the newly acquired territories, firstly because some of those territories were poor culturally and secondly because the Muslims could afford to do that due to the continuous and rapid growth of Islamic civilization. As a result, to the same places Muslims were exporting more and more from the nucleus of the Islamic state, in Syria, Palestine,

⁵⁶ Titus Burckhardt, *Art of Islam*, p. 9.

Madinah and Iraq. The language of the Islamic architectural identity that evolved—chiefly in the said nucleus—was one of the things often exported. Some of the geographical regions where the newly evolved language of Islamic architecture has been exported, partly or completely, were al-Andalus or Islamic Spain, Tunis, Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain, Nishapur and Afrasiyab (near Samarkand).⁵⁷ The exported influences were either Umayyad or Abbasid, or were a synthesis of both.

In his paper titled “*Islamization and Arabization in al-Andalus: A General View*,” Anwar G. Chejne stresses that when the Muslims confronted the Christian-Spanish society in al-Andalus, the latter was one of those territories seen as underdeveloped culturally. Thus, the Muslims of al-Andalus turned not inward for self-development, but outward toward the Muslim East for religious and cultural inspiration and guidance.⁵⁸ The Muslims in al-Andalus “orientalized the court and administration, imported talent of all sorts from the (Muslim) East, and built an enormous number of mosques, public baths, palaces and summer homes on oriental models.”⁵⁹

After the first Abbasid period, when new provincial dynasties in different parts of the vast Islamic state started to emerge breaking away from the Abbasid dominance and that of the cities of Baghdad and Samarra, a new impetus was created for further enhancing the language of Islamic architecture. This was an inevitable course of events however: firstly, due to the emergence of new and diffused cultural centers which brought some new ethnic groups and new geographical areas to the fore; secondly, due to a new economic drive entailed in the new states and kingdoms; and lastly, due to the new protagonists and patrons who had a remarkable passion, pioneering aspirations, and a strong political will. In other words, the same forces that led to the creation of the identity of Islamic architecture continued to enrich, advance and sustain it after the first through to the second Abbasid period and beyond. It is thus

⁵⁷ K.A.C. Creswell, *A Short Account of Early Muslim Architecture*, p. 415.

⁵⁸ Anwar G. Chejne, *Islamization and Arabization in al-Andalus: A General View*, in *Islam and Cultural Change in the Middle Ages*, edited by Speros Vryonis Jr., (Los Angeles: University of California, 1973), p. 71.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 72, 73.

appropriate that the drastic weakening of the Abbasid central rule and the beginning of the break-up of its many territories should serve us as a dim demarcation line between the first unified, and integrated and the second decentralized and disintegrated Abbasid periods.

As an illustration of the Muslim civilizational strength during the first Abbasid period, which inevitably spurred and guided Islamic architecture to the heights hitherto unknown, we shall refer to the case of the caliph al-Mansur's building of the city of Baghdad. When he decided to build the city, he clearly displayed how visionary he was in matters concerning the questions of Islamic urbanism, art, architecture and general planning and development. It also proved that the onus of elevating the Islamic culture and civilization to a new level fell on the shoulders of a right and competent person, and by an extension, on the shoulders of a right and competent party, i.e., the Abbasids. While surveying the possible locations of the future capital of the Islamic state, al-Mansur is reported to have said:

What I want is a place that is comfortable for the people and congenial for them as well as for me, a place where the prices will not become high for them and the food supplies will not prove too hard to obtain. If I live in a place where it is impossible to import anything by land or sea, the prices will be high, goods will be scarce, and shortages in the food supply will cause hardship for the people.⁶⁰

Eventually, the choice fell on a place between the rivers of Tigris and Euphrates, and among several waterways that branched off from those two rivers to water the distant lands. Geographically and environmentally, it was an extremely conducive location. Al-Mansur was aware that the chosen location will invariably give the new city access to the main overland trade routes as well as to the major inland water carriers.⁶¹ The easy, smooth and effective transportation of all

⁶⁰ Ibn Jarir al-Tabari, *The History*, vol. 28, p. 238-242.

⁶¹ Al-Ya'qubi, *Kitab al-Buldan*, (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-233 Ilmiyyah, 2002), p. 20-25. Al-Ya'qubi, *Tarikh al-Ya'qubi*, vol. 2 p. 373-374.

kinds of materials and supplies thus shall be assured, and trade with Syria, Wasit, Basrah, Armenia, and as far as Egypt on the west and China and India on the east would soon intensify. As a result, supply of goods will exceed, or at least match demand for them, keeping prices at a desirably low level, something that al-Mansur was remarkably concerned about in his quest for an appropriate site. Any unjustified price hike intended by some unscrupulous traders could be then, without much effort, precluded and things be quickly brought under control. The markets would be able to cater to the needs of the populace, be they necessities and foodstuffs or simply conveniences and luxuries. The people's income would grow large, so would the expenditure, because the two balance each other in every city. And if both income and expenditure are large, the inhabitants became more favorably situated, and the city developed and expanded rapidly. In the end, the state treasury would be enriched by the taxes collected from the thriving businesses, making it a considerable source of earning which, if properly managed, would always have potential to grow and flourish. New swelling revenues could be generously used, among other things, for further development, urbanization, art, architecture, intellectual pursuit, and for sustaining and advancing the military whose contributions in both protecting the regime and fortifying and expanding the frontiers of the state were at that point and, surely, in a foreseeable future as fundamental as ever. All this would only promote the new city, both locally and internationally, and with it, the whole state and the religion of Islam.

The favorable universal milieu of the city would render it attractive for the masses, professionals and intellectuals alike. They thronged to it, aiming at settling in it or in its immediate vicinity. Most of them aspired to become part of the Abbasid's enormous bureaucracy or engage in trade. The region converted into a hub of all sorts of productive and beneficial activities. Ultimately, the city superseded and outshone, almost in every respect, other Islamic cities and lived up to its reputation as the seat of a new and one of the most potent Muslim governments ever.

That is exactly what al-Mansur had in mind when deciding to build Baghdad, and so it in due time occurred. It was not long before Baghdad *de facto* became not only the political capital of the

expansive Muslim empire, governing most of its provinces, but also its military, religious, intellectual, scientific and industrial awesome midpoint.

Philip K. Hitti rightly wrote to this effect:

In a few years the town grew into an emporium of trade and commerce and a political center of the greatest international importance. As if called into existence by a magician's wand, this city of al-Mansur fell heir to the power and prestige of Ctesiphon, Babylon, Nineveh, Ur and other capitals of the ancient Orient, attained a degree of prestige and splendor unrivaled in the Middle Ages, except perhaps by Constantinople.⁶²

Robert Hillenbrand also wrote about the civilizational clout that the city of Baghdad, and with it the Abbasids, enjoyed towards the end of the first Abbasid period, as well as about how far Islamic architecture has come of age during the same period:

It (Baghdad) absorbed ideas, artifacts and influences from the East – from the Iranian world, India, China and the Eurasian steppe, and then exported them, transformed, throughout the Islamic world, stamped with its own unique cachet and glamour. Nine-bay mosque in Afghanistan and Spain, Baghdadi textiles laboriously copied in Andalusia, even down to the inscription identifying the piece as 'made in Baghdad', Iraqi stucco forms in Egypt and Central Asia – all attest the unchallenged cultural dominance of Baghdad. The cumulative gravitational pull exerted by the eastern territories broke the grip of Mediterranean culture, and specifically of Graeco-Roman classicism and its Byzantine Christian descendent, on Islamic

⁶² Philip K. Hitti, *History of the Arabs*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), p. 293.

art. Classical forms can still be dimly discerned on occasion – the triumphal arch underlies the portals of Abbasid palaces, and all three styles of Samarran stucco are foreshadowed in early Byzantine art—but they have undergone a sea-change. New contexts and new functions transform them.⁶³

Indeed, history and legend unite in affirming that the first Abbasid period, especially the reign of the caliph Harun al-Rashid (706-809 AC/170-193 H), was a time when the Abbasid power and the glamour of Baghdad reached a zenith hardly ever paralleled ever after. Baghdad soon became a world center of prodigious wealth and international significance, standing alone as the rival of Byzantium. In terms of architecture too, Baghdad became peerless in the whole of the Muslim world. Internationally, the city and its Muslims soon rivaled the best architectural achievements of both the Byzantine and Persian empires. According to Philip K. Hitti, the splendor of Baghdad “kept pace with the prosperity of the empire of which it was the capital. It was then that Baghdad became a city with no peer throughout the whole world.”⁶⁴ The extravagant lifestyles of some members of the Abbasid ruling family: Muslim sophisticated social life, pastimes, domestic life and architecture, literature and poetry, urbanization, various works of art and architecture, trade and commerce – all set the stage for the emergence of a number of myths, legends and exaggerated truths associated with the various aspects of the life of rulers, noblemen, scholars, poets, mystics and the general public during this period which have been preserved in voluminous books on Arab-Islamic literature, poetry and general history.

Islamic architecture during the first Abbasid period, as it was the case during the Umayyad period, unreservedly displayed a wide range of foreign influences which were successfully integrated into the body of Islamic architectural vocabulary. Those influences were mostly Persian, followed by the Byzantine, Coptic and later the

⁶³ Robert Hillenbrand, *Islamic Art and Architecture*, p. 40.

⁶⁴ Philip K. Hitti, *History of the Arabs*, p. 301. See also: Ibn Kathir, *al-Bidayah wa al-Nihayah*, vol. 10 p. 104-106.

Turkish ones. Some of the characteristics of Islamic architecture, mainly with respect to its form, under the Abbasids from their first period, were presented by K.A.C. Creswell. According to him, the mosques of this period vary widely in design, even in Iraq. Mosques with the roof resting directly on piers or wooden columns without the intermediary of arches were widespread. Nevertheless, mosques with the roof resting on arcades appear too. The square plan of early Iraqi mosques departed from the two great mosques of Samarra, nevertheless it was brought to Egypt by Ahmad ibn Tulun. There were also vaulted mosques. Mosques with a dome in front of the *mihrab*, though not a prominent feature of this period, were scarcely available. The *sahn* or the courtyard of some mosques, except for the sanctuary on the *qiblah* side, was not surrounded by *riwaqs*. In case of some other mosques, the *sahn* was surrounded by *riwaqs* on all sides. Arcades in mosques were mostly parallel to the *qiblah* side. Some, however, run perpendicular to the *qiblah*. The minarets of mosques had a square form, which remained the fixed type in the Muslim West until modern times.⁶⁵

In royal palaces, K.A.C. Creswell continues.

the best material available was burnt brick, of a quality very inferior to that used later in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. But a great part of the palaces of Samarra were built of that basest of material – mud brick – hidden by thick coats of stucco... In these palaces the decoration is usually confined to the stucco dadoes and door-jambs, the wooden door-soffits and the ceilings. Glass mosaic (*fusaiifisa*), of which such great use was made during the Umayyad period, was sometimes employed..." Of mausoleums only one has come down to us, whereas there is none from the Umayyad period.⁶⁶ This is doubtless due to the fact that the Muslims, at this time, were reluctant to have buildings above their

⁶⁵ K.A.C. Creswell, *A Short Account of Early Muslim Architecture*, p. 415.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 416.

graves due to a number of religious restrictions, but this feeling started to evaporate completely in many people a couple of centuries later.

“Geometrical ornament in this early period of Islam was not the permanent feature it became in later times. It was mainly called into use for window grilles, although geometrical networks, filled with arabesque, were sparingly used... A new type of pointed arch appears, the four-centered arch, which was of a Persian origin... The earliest existing squinches in Islam, a feature borrowed from Sasanian Persia, date from this period... One of the most important innovations was the introduction of luster tiles, which were first made in Iraq.”⁶⁷

Long before the first Abbasid period, the identity of the Islamic house was firmly established due to the refinement, sensitivity and significance of the family institution in Islam which the former shields and nurtures. The typical courtyard house which was a permanent feature throughout the Muslim world long preceded the Abbasids and their reign.⁶⁸ K.A.C. Creswell, quoting Herzfeld, provided us with many details of the houses of Samarra, which are based on archaeological evidence. The details concern the organization and function of the houses inner spaces, decoration, building materials, environmental responsiveness and adaptability, strict compliance with certain religious, social and cultural dictates.⁶⁹

Conclusion: Inventing in civilization vis-à-vis following in religion

To conclude this paper on the evolution of Islamic architecture and Islamic civilization in general, where a subtle interplay between original Islamic and borrowed foreign elements and effects was at display, it would be appropriate to say a few words on the nature of

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 416, 417. See also: Sheila Blair & Jonathan Bloom, *Iraq, Iran & Egypt: the Abbasids*, in *Islam: Art and Architecture*, p. 90-127.

⁶⁸ Philip K. Hitti, *Syria, a Short History*, (London: Macmillan & Co Ltd, 1959), p. 136.

⁶⁹ K.A.C. Creswell, *A Short Account of Early Muslim Architecture*, p. 373.

the relationship between originality and imitation in that evolution process.

Indeed, it is a divine principle that every civilization, with its built environment in the forefront, is a synthesis of originality and derivativeness, of indigenous fervor and creativity and foreign connections and influences, sometimes the former outweighing the latter in scale and effect, and at other times the latter doing the same to the former. The relationship between the two poles in the synthesis is innate, spontaneous, complementary and affable, rather than confrontational, enforced, synthetic and unsettling. There can never be a civilization, with its built environment, that is completely original without borrowing or without being influenced by other civilizations. This applies as much to Islamic as to any other civilization.

Abbas Mahmud al-Akkad said on this: Originality is common to all civilizations. Each civilization created some of its features and borrowed others. It has its own characteristic traits among world civilizations. There is no civilization whatsoever that was unique in its originality or derivativeness or was devoid of characterizing traits that distinguished it from other civilizations. Some people allege that derivativeness has always been characteristic of the Arab race ever since it has had contact with the history of the most ancient world... When the Arabs re-emerged after Islam, they had their own civilization but still it was a copied one; it was not initiated or created by them... We can throw doubt on this claim by asking in the first place: where is that civilization that initiated and did not borrow? Then, where is that civilization whose scientists and savants were all of one pure race and had not admixed with other races? ⁷⁰

Furthermore, it was the worldview and the total spirit of Islam that had taught the first Muslims to know no limits or constraints when the things came to originality and creativity while inventing and using the legitimate matters of culture and civilization, with architecture being their integral part. However, when things came to religion: its permanent belief system, standard practices and

⁷⁰ Abbas Mahmud al-Akkad, *Originality and Derivativeness*, <http://www.ymsite.com/books/aiec/originality.html>.

the body of spiritual values and principles, there was no room whatsoever for the slightest compromise or disregard in terms of their proper interpretation and application. There was no room at all for invention in religion because Islam had been perfected by God, so doing anything like that would have implied opposition to the authority of God and His words. Allah says on this: "... This day have I perfected for you your religion and completed My favor on you and chosen for you Islam as a religion." (al-Tawbah, 3)

The Prophet (pbuh) said that there is nothing that brings people closer to the bliss of Paradise (*Jannah*) and keeps them away from Hellfire but that he did not inform and teach them about.⁷¹ There will never be a need for any religious addition or invention.

The Prophet (pbuh) also said that whatever Allah has made lawful in His Book (the Qur'an), it is lawful (*halal*), and whatever He prohibited, it is prohibited (*haram*). However, whatever Allah did not refer to as either lawful or prohibited, such is to be regarded as a gift or a sign of Allah's clemency (*'afiyah*) towards men. "So, accept Allah's '*afiyah* because it is not that Allah ever forgets or overlooks anything", was the Prophet's remark.⁷²

Following without inventing in religion, as well as inventing in sheer worldly matters which from time to time were ingeniously combined with borrowing from others, was the Muslim rule of the early days of Islam and its civilization. Indeed, this was a sign of Muslim devotion, dynamism, progress, enlightenment and maturity. It was a sign of their strength and the strength of Islamic civilization. Hence, it could be suggested that the opposite of this rule, i.e., blindly following others and borrowing from them in worldly matters, together with irresponsible invention in religious matters, which is exactly the opposite of what Islam and the Prophet (pbuh) called for, was one of the reasons of the Muslim subsequent decline, and is a major reason behind the inability of today's Muslims to pick themselves up, make their voice heard by others and start making a notable civilizational headway.

⁷¹ *Mukhtasar Tafsir Ibn Kathir*, Ikhtasarahu al-Sabuni Muhammad 240 Ali, (Beirut: Dar al-Qur'an al-Karim, 1981), vol. 2 p. 412.

⁷² *Ibid.*, vol. 2 p. 460.

Since Islamic architecture is a synthesis of the permanent spiritual disposition of Islam and the relative exigencies of the corporeal world, it had to carefully demonstrate the Islamic ways of dealing with things and issues brought about by the assertion of Islam on the world stage. It had to synthesize the two poles of existence, that is, the permanent and the temporary, while honoring and clearly delineating their respective domains and, at the same time, emphasizing the scope and areas of their mutual reliance and cooperation. This made the total identity of Islamic architecture appear to have been progressing very slowly, which, however, by no means is to be viewed as a shortcoming. Islamic architecture was progressing steadily and confidently, whether slowly or rapidly such was of no relevance. It had to rise to the challenges posed by the Muslim tasks of the internationalization of the Islamic call, out-and-out Islamization, integration and co-existence with other cultural and civilizational systems. In the process, the purity, appeal and pragmatism of Islam, which Islamic architecture duly symbolizes, had to be preserved at all costs. Any deviational tendency, be it from within or without, at either the conceptual or the technical plane, and at the hands of patrons, engineers, builders or users, had to be unreservedly confronted and completely weeded out. That was a matter of safeguarding Islam and the wellbeing of the Muslim community through safeguarding the meaning, significance and roles of genuine Islamic architecture.